



NEWS RELEASE

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USDA AND COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY RESEARCHERS DEVELOP FIRST LIVE TEST FOR CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE IN ELK

FORT COLLINS, Colo., May 30, 2008--Researchers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and Colorado State University (CSU) recently completed their third year of evaluating and validating the first live rectal-tissue biopsy method for detecting chronic wasting disease (CWD) in captive and wild elk. To date, researchers have collected over 1,500 biopsies from captive elk in Colorado and used the technique to find 15 elk that were positive for CWD. As compared to proven post-mortem diagnostic tests, this live test appears to be nearly as accurate.

"The key advantage to the rectal biopsy test is that it can be performed on live animals. Until now, there was no practical live test for CWD in elk," said research wildlife biologist Dr. Kurt VerCauteren with APHIS' Wildlife Services (WS) National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC). "With this technique we can detect CWD in animals not showing any signs of the disease and, thus, remove them so they are not left to infect other individuals and further contaminate the environment."

The research is a collaborative effort between APHIS' WS and Veterinary Services programs, the Agricultural Research Service, and the Colorado State University Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory within the College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

The majority of the research was conducted on the Velvet Ridge Elk Ranch, owned by Dennis and Stephanie White, near Fort Collins, Colo. In 2002, an elk on the ranch was confirmed to have CWD and since that time the Whites have worked closely with NWRC and other collaborators to learn more about CWD and to develop methods to manage it in captive and wild settings.

"The use of this new live test in the initial screening, surveillance and monitoring of CWD will greatly aid in the management and control of the disease in the wild, as well as in captive settings," said VerCauteren.

CWD is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy whereby abnormal proteins accumulate in the central nervous and lymphatic systems of infected animals causing a degenerative lack of control and a "wasting-away" death. Currently, there is no cure for CWD.

CWD has been reported in captive and free-ranging mule deer, white-tailed deer, elk and moose. CWD has been a devastating disease to the captive elk industry. An estimated 12,000-14,000 captive elk have been killed in the western United States and Canada in the past 7-8 years

to control CWD. Several thousand free-ranging mule deer, white-tailed deer and elk also have been killed in attempts to reduce the disease in the wild.

The NWRC is the research arm of USDA's WS program. It is the federal institution devoted to resolving problems caused by the interaction of wild animals and society. The center applies scientific expertise to the development of practical methods to resolve these problems and to maintain the quality of the environments shared with wildlife. To learn more about NWRC, visit its Web site at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife_damage/nwrc/.

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